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RICHARD HAASS INTERVIEW WITH:
REINALDO TROMBETTA, EL NACIONAL
ALICIA LA ROTA, EI UNIVERSAL
LUDMILA VINOGRADOFF, PANORAMA
RODOLFO MONDOLFI, EL CARABOBEÑO

Richard Haass Introduction

I am here in Venezuela because of the obvious importance of this country, our commitment to democracy, and also our concern over the political trajectory here. I had meetings today with the Vice President and President, as well as with members of the political opposition, members of the private sector, the media and so forth. This was an attempt, in a fairly short amount of time, to expose myself to the thinking of a range of Venezuelan officials and prominent persons. We talked about the internal situation here, we talked about the bilateral relationship and we also discussed the larger regional contacts.

What I tried to do in all my meetings was to urge political dialogue between the government and the opposition. That they sit down with one another without pre-conditions; if necessary with the help of outsiders such as the OAS or the UN or anyone else who is mutually acceptable. But, again, to try to set up a dialogue, with a potentiality to address some of the basic challenges facing the society at this difficult time. Obviously it's up to the Venezuelans, to decide whether to do this. It's up to them to decide indeed the future course of their country.

But it just seems to me and to others, who care about Venezuela, that again, the current trajectory is not desirable, that you have an economy that has been shrinking for the best part of two decades. You have too many talented Venezuelans looking to leave this country, rather than live in this country. That is not good for Venezuela, and it's not good for the United States given our interest here. I also made clear our feeling that any change that takes place here needs to be within the construct and context of democracy. You can't improve democracy by departing from democracy. So we urge that any change here be done consistent with democracy and the Constitution. Why don't I leave it at that and I will be happy to answer your questions as best I can. Again, my apologies for being so late, but it was, as they say, unavoidable.

Q: It is interesting that the State Department would send you here. I mean, because of all your experience in the Middle East and with the Irish. I remember when Mr. Cass Ballenger and William Delahaunt were here, one month ago. They compared the Venezuelan crisis with the Irish crisis. Mr. Ballenger compared the Venezuelan situation with The Middle East. Do you think that comparison is too far-fetched?

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A: It's too far-fetched...in the sense that, thank God, the situation here is nothing remotely like the situation in the Middle East. You do not have here, as in Northern Ireland for much of the last few decades, a situation defined by paramilitaries. But, also two things. First of all, this [Venezuela] is a deeply divided, deeply polarized society. What we see from these other situations is both a warning and a degree of hope. And by that I mean, the warning is that we see what happens when polarized societies do not address the source of their other divisions. There is the potential for deterioration, there is always the potential that force replaces traditional politics. No one should want that to happen in Venezuela. So when we look at these other societies, one gets a warning of what could happen if things continue to go wrong.

The good news is that it is not inevitable. Both the Middle East and Northern Ireland show us the potential for deeply divided societies to begin to bridge their differences. I'm the U.S. envoy to Northern Ireland, to the peace process there. There we have made significant advances. The two communities, with the help of outsiders, have come a long way towards reducing the role of force. Now, after fifty years of a cease-fire, they have also agreed to a whole range of political agreements. Increasingly, talking and traditional politics have come to replace violence. That shows me, someone who is not an expert in Venezuela, the potential to offer dialogue. Also, it shows the potential utility, to the government and the opposition, of inviting in outsiders. Whether it is the OAS or the U.N, or someone else, there could be a role here for structured dialogue facilitated by outside support.

Q: Good afternoon, Mr. Haass. You are basically talking about the application of the Inter-American Charter of the OAS. But there are many criticisms of that new instrument in that while they now demand the application of the charter, they didn't see the deterioration of the Venezuelan democracy. There were not warning signals until April 11th. So, my question is, does that multilateral organization fail to have mechanisms to revise and correct the problems in democracies? Additionally, which country do you think could be a mediator in this situation and which country could not be accepted by both parties?

A: There is an expression in English that hindsight is always 20-20. I don't know if that translates well. It is always easy to see more accurately looking backwards in time. In that respect, clearly there were warning signs before April 11 that we all should have recognized and acted upon. That opportunity was lost. That said, it's sometimes difficult for insiders to request help, and for outsiders to offer help, until there is a very powerful demonstration of need. I think the events of mid-April were just that, a very clear demonstration of need.

The good news I would say, for Venezuelans regardless of their political orientation, is that there are still opportunities. There's still the opportunity for Venezuelans to bridge their differences peacefully and to make democracy work

better. I would let academics and doctoral candidates write their thesis on whether the OAS maybe missed some opportunities and some warning signals. To be more serious, it might be useful for the OAS to review that so they can learn some lessons. This is in some way the first serious test since the charter was passed on September 11. Maybe there are some lessons for other problems in the hemisphere in the future and we will be more sensitive to act before the crisis comes to a head.

But again, I think the good news for Venezuela is that it's not too late. Whether it's the OAS or anyone else, it is up to the Venezuelans themselves to act to address the profound differences, and the profound divide that defines this society. The second half of your question, I don't have candidates particularly, this individual or that country, but that's not the point. What matters is we find someone who is qualified and acceptable to both the government and the opposition. Whether that person is identified with the OAS, or with the UN, or with some private institutions, or is some eminent and prominent individual, that's secondary, so long as this person has talent and the good offices to bring to the discussion. He should be a welcomed participant in the political process here. I would hope that very quickly the government and the opposition would address essentially your second question. The question of who might be acceptable to invite in and how this political dialogue could be structured so that it really does address the recognized problems of governance here.

Q: I'm Ludmilla Vinogradoff. What did you talk about with Mr. Chávez and what did he say to you?

A: What did I talk with President Chávez about? As you might expect, in a meeting that lasted two and half hours, we talked about quite a few things. For a good part of the meeting we did talk about the internal political situation here. I tried to give the President the flavor of my meetings with other people in Venezuela as well as give him the sense of my own thinking about what needed to be done. Some of the points I just said here with you I also shared with him. I let him speak for himself, but essentially he gave his perspective on why the political situation is what it is today. Clearly he sees it very differently than the opposition does. I said, "you don't have to persuade me, the opposition doesn't have to persuade me. But what you both have persuaded me is that there is a tremendous difference between you, and the only way I see it being reconciled is by the two of you sitting down most likely with some outside help."

So we did spend a good deal of time talking about a dialogue and how that might be facilitated. Secondly, we did talk of some ways about bilateral issues between the United States and Venezuela. We talked about the areas where, from our perspective, we have some disagreements or things could change. Things that the government has said and done. I also made clear our deep interest in a good relationship with this government and with Venezuela. It's indeed, obviously, in the interest of both countries to have a constructive, successful

bilateral relationship. I talked about those actions, particularly what I thought could help us in various areas. But again, I did emphasize that the most important area for improving our bilateral relationship, is improving the internal situation here.

The United States has, a basic stake in Venezuela's stability and its political and economic health. That can't be fixed by the United States, or anyone else, that can only be fixed by Venezuelans. So, in a funny certain way, the second point of our conversation about the bilateral issues returned to the first part of our conversation about the internal situation here. We talked about regional issues, particularly Colombia, and the situation there. What could be done to improve or to strengthen democracy in Colombia, what could be done to reduce the military threat posed to Colombia and particularly by the FARC. So that was essentially the range of our meeting.

Q: I don't seem to have heard what you said the President's response was about the third country or third person that could act as a mediator. And the other question is, you are the Policy Planning Office Director, and you said that you don't have so much knowledge about Venezuela. I imagine that you came here because you will design some policies aiming at improving the relationships between Venezuela and Colombia...Venezuela and the United States. Then, I would like to know what ideas are you taking with you, if there are any cooperation agreements?

The third question taking advantage of your expertise in the relations with the IRA. A hearing took place, I don't remember where on Capitol Hill after April 19, they talked about Colombia and IRA. General Tapias talked about the possibility that Venezuela could be a country of transit for IRA members and he gave frightening data. I figure you have that report as well. I would like to know if you know how they go through Venezuela, if they do so, i.e. the people that go to the demilitarized zone, and what do you think about that? Did you discuss this issue with the President? Thanks.

A: You're right on the first point; I didn't speak about what the President had to say about the facilitation. So you are listening closely and accurately. We did speak about some ideas. Every once in a while it's better for things to stay private. However, I would simply say that I detected on his part some openness to the idea of both the national dialogue as well as the possibility of bringing in outsiders who could facilitate this dialogue. We talked about both actions, in principle as well as in some detail. I understood your second question to be about U.S-Venezuelan; what ideas should I bring home? Some have to do with things we can do to maybe facilitate the internal dialogue. I would discuss this with others back in Washington. We'll continue to dialogue with your government and opposition. These ideas are UNCLASSIFIED all their infancy, but I can

see some things that we might do to be helpful in terms of other aspects of our bilateral relationship.

We talked about things that could be done to improve our economic relations; about things that could be done to improve our cooperation against terrorism, about what we could do to continue the fight against narcotics trafficking. I also emphasized that no one associated with the United States had anything to do with the events of mid-April. It's important that that truth be understood because promoting ideas which would simply increase resentment towards the United States-anti-Americanism-would not be in the interest of either the United States or Venezuela.

On the question of Colombia, we didn't talk specifically about the idea of anyone transiting through Venezuela. I made it clear, in a different context to the IRA, speaking to their political wing Sinn Fein, that the United States strongly opposes, to say the least, any support whatsoever from the IRA to the FARC. I made clear that if there were any evidence that such support was taking place, then it would cause a serious problem, or raise serious issues in U.S. relationships and US policy towards the IRA and towards Sinn Fein. So, as a result, I'm hopeful and indeed confident that this issue will no longer arise. (i.e. the question of anyone transiting your territory for the purpose of helping the FARC).

I did more generally discuss with the President the perception in Colombia that the FARC has received some support from Venezuela or has been able to use Venezuelan territory for a safe haven. The President was very specific and very strong and said this was not the case. I urged that communication and cooperation between the government of Venezuela, and what will be the new government of Colombia after August 7, increase to deal with this threat. I believe that it is a threat not simply to Colombia, but a threat to the entire region.

Q: I have a question; actually I think it's almost three questions, too.

A: Oh, that's a multiple question.

Q: You're saying President Chávez said Venezuela has not supported the FARC in any way. Does that mean that the U.S. does not have any intelligence on that, that can contradict President Chávez? On the other hand, do you think the Venezuelan government is open to the U.S. as a peace broker, considering what he said on a BBC interview, that he had some proof that the U.S. had something to do with what happened here on April 11th?

And my third question, I understand you've spoken about the U.S. as some kind of sheriff that is supposed to come in when nobody else is willing to fight for democracy or justice. I also heard, for example, that Stratfor, the analysts, said that the U.S. would probably never come in and face Chávez unless Chávez

pointed his guns to his own people. There are many people saying that's what happened here on April 11th. What is your thought on that?

A: I don't understand the last question, I'm sorry.

Q: There are people saying that Chávez did point his guns at the Venezuelans on April 11th. He ordered the military to shoot the people. Do you think, do you have any information on that?

A: I don't have any information, but again, obviously investigations are going on. Your National Assembly, your equivalent to our Congress, is holding extensive hearings on the events of mid-April. You've got a commission to look into it, so it's my hope that the truth comes out. I think it's important that Venezuelans come to terms with their own history, so I'm confident that that would show that the United States had absolutely no role whatsoever in those events.

The question about whether Venezuela is open to the U.S. as some kind of broker/facilitator? That is up to Venezuelans to decide. What matters is that the government and the opposition come up with a common agreement on who will be welcome. Whether, again, it is through the OAS or the UN or some countries, including the United States, that's secondary. What matters, again, is that the opposition and the government can agree and then work on good faith with some third party.

Your first question is just about a principle, and we don't discuss intelligence matters of any sort, so I'll just leave that alone. Thank you.

Q: What is your opinion of the close relations of the government of President Chávez with the governments of Fidel Castro, Saddam Hussein and Libya's Mohammad Khadafy?

The President himself, again, could speak for himself. I'm always uncomfortable speaking for others. I would simply say that I don't want to characterize Venezuela's relationship with another country and describe them as close or distant or whatever. I'll let the President characterize them. I would simply say that we think there are no grounds whatsoever for anyone to have a relationship with Saddam Hussein. The international community has laid out requirements for Iraqi behavior that Saddam Hussein has consistently and systematically violated. I can't see the grounds for anyone maintaining any relationship, much less a close relationship. That said, I'm not accusing this government of maintaining a close relationship with Saddam Hussein.

We've also had our differences with the government of Libya, and obviously we have our differences with Mr. Castro and with Cuba. Venezuela is a sovereign country, it's for it to decide its own foreign policy. That said, in the case of Cuba, it's the one country in the hemisphere, out of 35, that has nothing to do with

democracy, and I think that, in some way, tells you all you need to know. I would suggest that countries only welcome Cuba into normal relations when Cuba acts like a normal country.

In the context of the Democratic Charter, that means democracy, and that means giving real political, real human and real economic rights to the Cuban people. After four decades, we can see precious few signs that Mr. Castro is prepared to do that, so I would hope that in meetings between the Venezuelan government and the Cuban government there'd be a simple message: open up! Open up politically, open up economically, give your people a decent life, join the tide, and join the XXI century. Do the things that would make it possible for you to get in step with the other 34 countries of this hemisphere. If that were the message coming from the government of Venezuela, that would be a message I would welcome.

Q: When we were waiting here, we learned that Mr. Carmona Estanga left [his home to seek asylum in the Colombian embassy]. I imagine that President Chávez got the same piece of news while he was talking to you, given the fact that the meeting took so long. First, I would like to know if he made comments regarding the issue and secondly, what do you think about this situation that you had to live through as an observer?

A. I don't know whether he received the news during my meeting. At least, it didn't come up, so I don't know what he thinks about it. What do I think about it? I don't know enough, quite honestly, to comment on it, so I would pass on that question. Again, my apologies for keeping you waiting, I'm very sorry. It's not something I like to do. Our meeting went on longer than planned. I hope I did not inconvenience you too much. But thank you for waiting.